

7. Transportation System

A basic need of managing the natural resources is the ability to access the natural resources. This access is provided through an extensive transportation system of Forest Service, state, local and tribal routes. It is important that the FS road system is safe, cost effective, environmental sound, and the minimum necessary to provide adequate access. Access also ensures users are provided a seamless system across all state, local and tribal routes.

Key Points:

- Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines are being met.
- Objective to decommission 200 miles of OML 1 road is on schedule for completion by the end of 1st decade.

Monitoring Question

To what extent is the Forest, in coordination with other public road agencies, providing safe, cost effective, minimum necessary road systems for administrative and public use?

Results

The Forest has been successful partnering with local road agencies to provide a safe and cost effective transportation system for the traveling public. Road maintenance agreements are currently held with all three local counties and Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe for the maintenance on over 100 miles of Forest Service roads. These roads are generally areas of high public use, access residential areas, and/or receive more public traffic than administrative Forest Service traffic. Work is now beginning with local township boards to develop maintenance agreements to improve the roads in their areas as well.

In 2006, OHV use was designated on FS roads through a collaborative effort with State & local governments and Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. A motorized vehicle use map is produced annually and is available to the general public free of charge. Over 1,360 miles of FS roads were designated open to OHV in 2010. In addition to the map, signing standards were improved and all roads open for motorized use have a new Route ID number sign installed, and most of the regulatory traffic signs have been replaced following new federally mandated signing regulations.

The main routes of the FS transportation system were analyzed in 2002 with the conclusion that the passenger car network of routes was in place and sufficient for use with little change expected. All other FS roads are analyzed during project level planning where recommendations for decommissioning and closure are determined. Also during this time, much effort has gone into the documenting of the unauthorized routes, those roads that were not system roads, but are travelable road corridors on federal land. When the Forest Plan was completed, little data was available on unauthorized roads (U roads). Now over 250 miles of unauthorized routes are mapped.

Overall, reported road miles on the Chippewa have increased. This is a direct result of better record keeping and identification of hundreds of unauthorized routes. Some of these routes are added to the National Forest System for long term need. No new permanent roads have been constructed.

Progress has been made in attaining the minimum road system by decommissioning over 140 miles of road. Not all of the road changes are from decommissioning. A few roads were converted to trails and remain in place. Actual road conditions may have changed, or decisions on the level of service needed for a particular road may have changed, which resulted in a different maintenance level. The Table below shows how the mileages by maintenance levels have changed.

Table 7-1. -Comparison in Road Miles

	Base (miles) Forest Plan	OPER ML (miles) end 2010	Change since Plan
ML 1	324.0	243.0	-81.0
ML 2	1,753.0	1,768.2	15.2
ML3	281.0	178.6	-102.4
ML4	246.0	241.2	-4.8
ML5	42.0	27.4	-14.6
U ROADS	-	264.5	610.2
TOTAL	2,646.0	2,722.9	422.6

Implications

Without including unauthorized roads, the transportation system is decreasing and the Forest is on schedule for achieving the decommissioning of 200 miles of OML 1 road in the first decade. Unauthorized roads need to be evaluated and further work needs to be completed on their elimination.

Cooperatively maintaining roads for the public users has proven to be cost effective. Standards are met through cooperative maintenance with local highway departments which allows the FS dollars to achieve more with less. Focus continues on improving the safety of the roads, while improving the environment, such as improved crossing structures when existing crossings fail and need to be replaced.

Forest Plan direction, standards and guidelines are being met.

New Issues

Controversy continues on motorized use of various vehicles on the same corridor and the safety implications of allowing mixed use. Requests are made to change allowed motorized uses on existing roads, both for allowing and prohibiting the use.

Budgets continue to be forecasted downward, but expectations for more services and safer roads continue to increase. National direction continues to focus on achieving a minimum road system.

Recommendations

- Continue use of partnerships and agreements to complete maintenance on roads, especially those providing residential access where higher services are requested.
- Monitor decommissioned roads to ensure the closure remains effective.
- Continue to eliminate the unauthorized road mileage through closures of unneeded roads or adding needed roads to the system.
- Continue to move towards a minimum road system that is affordable and still provides adequate access.

A more detailed report can be found in the project file and is available upon request.